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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 000304

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SF](#)

SUBJECT: ISRAELI AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES DIFFICULT RELATIONS  
WITH SOUTH AFRICA

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Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Israeli Ambassador Dov Segev-Steinberg told Ambassador Gips in a meeting in February 3 that relations between his country and South Africa remain difficult despite Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Ebrahim Ebrahim's desire to be a broker for peace in the Middle East. Overall, Segev-Steinberg seems to have a realistic view of where relations stand and where they may go during the next few years. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Gips met with Israeli Ambassador Dov Segev-Steinberg on February 3 to discuss Israel's relationship with South Africa. Segev-Steinberg said his country has had tough relations with South Africa since 1994, with the period between 2005 and 2006 being the most difficult. When he arrived in December 2008, Segev-Steinberg met with then President Kgalema Motlanthe and requested from South Africa that relations to be "less one-sided" (implying the South African Government often is too anti-Israel). Shortly after this meeting, however, then Deputy Foreign Minister Fatima Hajaig called Segev-Steinberg into her office and berated him for Israel's airstrikes in Gaza. He said, "I endured the worst hour of my career the way she was yelling at me." He added that her confrontation made for a "tough beginning" to his tenure in the country. What made matters even more difficult, Parliament's committee on foreign affairs in mid-2009 summoned Segev-Steinberg to testify in the National Assembly and explain Israel's actions in the Middle East.

¶3. (C) The Israeli Ambassador does not see much chance for substantial change in the relationship in the near future. He noted that Israel had great relations with South Africa before the democratic transition in 1994, but ties have weakened since the early days of Nelson Mandela's presidency.

He characterized briefly the situation in South Africa for Jewish South Africans. He said the community is shrinking -- from 140,000 at its peak to 70,000 now. He related that many Jewish South Africans have strong struggle credentials, and pointed to current Reserve Bank Governor Gill Marcus as a current senior South African official with such a background.

He added that Jewish South Africans are facing anti-Semitism in this country for "the first time" and said that was one reason many have left the country. He noted that many Jews leaving South Africa end up in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. When Ambassador Gips asked Segev-Steinberg who in South Africa is easy for Israel to work with, the Israeli Ambassador said Mathews Phosa and Cyril Ramaphosa.

¶4. (C) Segev-Steinberg claimed Ebrahim Ebrahim is "the biggest obstacle to Israel in the South African Government." Segev-Steinberg said, "He really runs the show on foreign affairs and is a problem for Israel." Ambassador Gips noted that Ebrahim views himself as a peacemaker who wants to push peace in the Middle East. Segev-Steinberg agreed with Ambassador Gips that the South African Government would like to upgrade relations with Israel so it can help the region. He added that South Africa wants peace in the region while holding the opinion that Israel should be negotiating with HAMAS rather than the Palestine Liberation Organization. He also said that South Africa's relationship with Iran -- which Qalso said that South Africa's relationship with Iran -- which is driven by South Africa's need for oil and Iranian funding to mosques in southern Africa -- could complicate peacekeeping efforts by Pretoria.

¶5. (C) Ambassador Gips asked the Israeli Ambassador his thoughts on the Goldstone Report regarding Israel's actions in Gaza in 2008 and early 2009. Segev-Steinberg said former South African Constitutional Court Judge Richard Goldstone "should have worked with others" for his findings. He added that Goldstone merely wants "fame and the United Nations Secretary General position." Segev-Steinberg added, "We did not meet with him here or in Israel because his views are already known."

¶6. (C) Comment: Relations between South Africa and Israel have been difficult since 1994 as many in the current government view the Israeli Government as having supported the apartheid regime. Israeli Ambassador Segev-Steinberg seems to have a realistic view of where relations stand, and where they may go, given the history and the current players in government such as Ebrahim. We dismiss Segev-Steinberg's comments about Goldstone. We know of no suggestion that the

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former South African Constitutional Court judge is interested in seeking the UNSYG position, and could not see how criticizing Israel would help him do so, given the USG's ability to veto any candidate. Goldstone is also already quite famous here. End Comment.

GIPS